

Pastor's Column

April 13, 2014

Our Lord's Passion and Bearing False Witness

Greetings in Our Suffering Lord.

Holy Week is upon us beginning with Passion (Palm) Sunday and running through Holy Saturday. During this week we recall how the eternal Jesus Christ was condemned to death, tortured, died and buried. His enemies wanted to get rid of Him and so they tried to trap him with his own words, all the while spreading words of detraction and calumny in an attempt to destroy his reputation: in the end it worked. Jesus was ultimately crucified on a cross, but before that happened, he was crucified with the tongue.

All of us at one time or another from childhood to the present have been guilty of saying something bad about another. It is insidious and all too common. It was the third and final sin that Adam committed in the Garden of Eden: the first was eating of the forbidden fruit, the second was hiding from God, and the third was blaming his first sin on his wife: *"it was the woman you put with me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it"* – out of the garden you go.

Pope Francis said in his homily at a morning Mass on September 13, 2013: *"There is no such thing as innocent gossip."* The Pope used strong language to denounce *"that hateful attitude toward one's neighbor when one becomes a 'judge' of his brother."* He reminded the congregation that Jesus used even stronger language, saying that anyone who hates his neighbor is a murderer. Thus, the Pontiff said, *"every time we judge our brothers in our hearts – or worse still when we speak ill of them with others, we are Christian murderers."* We all have reasons to be upset with someone else but we must be very careful in what if anything we say about them, *"for when you did it to the least of these, you did it to me"* – Jesus. All too often we say negative things about another in the moment without realizing that those words diminish them, and sometimes people do it on purpose. Essentially this takes two forms: detraction and calumny.

Detraction is the mortal sin of sharing information about another that is true but damages their reputation. All too often though, what we think is detraction: "I'm telling the truth after all" is not entirely true. When we say ill things of others we leave details out that we are or are not aware of; or we have mis-ordered them, so that the hierarchy of truths in a story is out of order (a fact is highlighted while another that would make us more sympathetic is ignored), maligning the true context of the other's situation. Calumny is the mortal sin of sharing information about another that is not true and damages their reputation. This is almost always done when someone thinks they are telling the truth when in reality they've got some facts wrong – sound familiar? Of course detraction and calumny get repeated, ultimately going far beyond the one or two people that we told, while the "facts" become ever more false. Another word for all of this is gossip. I've heard that gossip is only a venial sin and not mortal, but for the life of me I can't tell it apart from detraction and calumny and I don't think Our Lord can either.

What follows is an article from Rebecca Smith writing for Catholic Exchange called: [Rumor Has it: the Poison of Gossip](#). [February 5, 2013] I think that Rebecca does a fantastic job of calling our attention to the serious sin of gossip.

The habit of gossiping is one that is entirely destructive, and can be likened to an addiction to smoking cigarettes, easy to catch and difficult to get rid of. Both gossiping and smoking provide opportunities to superficially meet and bond with others and also present an alternative to quality conversation. In much the same way as lighting up a quick cigarette fills an awkward silence, telling a rumor also replaces good, wholesome conversation. They also share the obvious similarity of being a habit that is known to be harmful both to ourselves and to others, and yet we often still choose to indulge in it, even though the consequences can be severe and the damage irreversible.

One of the main problems with gossiping is how easily it can ruin the reputation of another. Shana Alexander once said, "Trying to squash a rumor is like trying to un-ring a bell." Once something is said, you can neither take it back nor guarantee that it will not be repeated. It doesn't have to be much, just enough to create suspicion-an idle comment implying that someone is a hopeless flirt, or a careless story told of how badly someone acted while drunk, and the damage is done. Although many times we try to justify ourselves doing this by saying that it is our duty "as a friend" to enlighten someone else, and we are "helping" others by telling them the truth, we sometimes forget that we also owe others compassion and mercy as well. Whether the information is true or not, it is not our job to pass it on.

In addition, gossiping tends to go hand in hand with hypocrisy because the act of judging others makes us feel like we are more righteous and less sinful than those we talk about. We find a way to blind ourselves to the fact that we often are committing the same sin as those who we are gossiping about – we even gossip about others who gossip, pretending that, somehow, it isn't bad when we do it, only when they do it. It is this same deceptive attitude that allows us as gossipers to pretend that no one ever talks about us, as if we were somehow safe from gossip ourselves (because there is clearly nothing about us deserving of gossip, right?). As a Spanish proverb goes, "Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you." We of all people should know that is true, and that, again, gossiping doesn't have to be true to be told and repeated.

Gossiping also unfortunately encourages a delight over other people's sins and failings, conditioning us to view those bad actions as far more "valuable" than good actions. We don't make it our business to know how virtuous people are being – we only want to know about the evil in their lives, and we want to know all details so that we can fully enjoy it (that is, "sympathize"). It is not right that we should be more excited and pleased to hear of a nasty divorce than a peaceful resolution to a friend's marriage issues, for instance. There is a spirit of greed in gossiping, a savoring of someone else's sorrow and pain, which is poison to those involved.

Remember, gossip is a vice that inherently involves multiple people: the person who is talked about, the person who is talked to, and the gossiper. After all, what is the point of telling a rumor if there is no one to hear it? It is important to point out that, while smoking is a choice that we have the right to make, we do not have the right to choose to carelessly hurt the reputations of others or invade their privacy. Just like second hand smoke, gossiping also does harm no matter who is exposed to it, regardless of whether they are willing participants or not. And although smoking zones may be an answer to secondhand smoke issues from cigarettes, there should never be "zones" where gossiping is allowed. In fact, we should strive to make wherever we ourselves are a "no gossip zone" and to do all we can to speak only words of kindness and compassion, so that when they leave us, they do only good.

If someone's shortcomings seem to justify negative comments, the Pope suggests an alternative approach: "Go and pray for him! Go and do penance for her!" May we all be so holy.

May Our Lord and His Blessed Mother Protect and Guide You,



Fr. Thomas Nathe